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ETERNAL HYMEN: GREEK-AUSTRALIAN FEMALE NARRATIVES OF VIRGINITY IN THE POST-POSTMODERN EPOCH

«Τὴν ωραιότητα τῆς παρθενίας σου καὶ τὸ υπέρλαμπρο τὸ τῆς ἀγνείας σου...»
(*The beauty of your virginity and the splendour of your purity...*)
Troparion to Virgin Mary in the Orthodox Church

INTRODUCTION

The present article endeavors to examine narratives of virginity as they have been viewed by some contemporary literary trends and to conceptualize, articulate and interpret oral testimonies elicited from Greek-Australian women across three generations. These oral testimonies encompassed and redefined a view of virginity – and the sequence of three intergenerational women affirms that its significance is waning – as a gradual evolution, transformation or even rejection of the concept. In literature, virginity has been presented antithetically as both anatomical and ideological, real and imagined, private and social/public, prestigious and as an obstacle, sacred and profane as well as a commodity and artifact. Oral testimonies, on the other hand, have the ability to reveal hidden realities of the individual self and to incorporate a novel variety of experiences and perspectives to this subject matter. As an epithet the word “virgin” means the unknown, the unattached, the unspoiled and the pure; as a noun “virginity” means an intact hymen and the absence of sexual intercourse between male and female. In this article the discussion is limited to this framework and won’t extend to other connotations and subdivisions of the term.

TRADITIONAL VIEWS OF VIRGINITY

The contemporary views of virginity had primarily been highlighted in Freud's psychological and psychoanalytic views regarding sexuality, the libido and the castration complex. Freud in his article *The Taboo of Virginity* describes virginity as a psychological turmoil after its loss and disregards entirely its physical characteristics.¹ He argues that at the point of penetrative intercourse the woman experiences hostile bitterness against the man, not because of the pain, or humiliation in case of rape, but rather due to her "penis envy, which never completely disappears in the relations between the sexes, and which is clearly indicated in the strivings and in the literary productions of emancipated women".² Freud being thoughtlessly incarcerated within the traditional patriarchal philology he overqualified the male's role in the female's loss of virginity. According to Freud the man that takes upon himself a woman's "immature sexuality", thus exposing himself to danger, for the "motives which seek to drive a woman to take vengeance for her defloration are not completely extinguished even in the mental life of the civilized woman".³ Bernau at this point argues that,

"It is noticeable that while Freud ascribes penis envy to all women, he emphasizes the particular case of the emancipated woman. Virginity, it seems, is always potentially dangerous to someone's health".⁴

Interestingly, Freud's views of virginity have been challenged by the latest archaeological findings of the well-preserved female frescoes traced up to the pre archaic period, in Thera (Θήρα) Greece. These frescoes revealed a rather sound matriarchal society, in which, according to archaeologists, women's sexuality was not connected with reproduction, but with her menstruation circle.⁵ The change of socio-political structure which occurred with the organisation of the city-state, affected very much the sexuality of women which became associated with her reproduction. Hence, virginity's new conceptualisation shaped a transformative evaluation. For this reason, in Homer's poetry both the virginal hymen and the purity of young women were glorified.⁶ Artemis and Athena, both famous virgins, divinized and consequently created strong connotations for the notion of virginity in antiquity. Athena primarily with her manly birth (from Zeus head), motherless (αμήτωρ), wise and protector of the city of Athens, sourced strong symbolisms of virginity that was reflected in her temple, the Parthenon: the Virgin (Παρθένος)

goddess' primary symbol of power and dominion. Later in literature, poetry and lyrics, Sappho, inspired by beauty, love and youth, immortalised virginity through her poetry:

Παρθενία, Παρθενία!
 Parthenia, Parthenia!
 Lost of sudden,
 Where have you gone?⁷

In Euripides' *Trojan Women*, Cassandra, the renowned prophetess, virgin, and dedicated priestess to Apollo, decried the imminent loss of her virginity by Agamemnon rather than her impending slavery:

Apollo's servant!
 O garlands of the god who is dearest to me, you joyful emblems of his worship, fare you, well. I have left the festivals in which I once found joy. Away with you! I tear you from my body – *so that while my flesh is still pure*, I may give them to the winds to carry you, O lord of prophecy.⁸

It wasn't until the establishment of Christianity however, that virginity became both conceptualized and institutionalized as a particular element that played a very significant role in society. Elizabeth Castelli (1986:65) in her studies regarding virginity in the early Christian era supported the argument that the institutionalization of virginity originated in the emergence of women's asceticism.⁹ Virginity was even more idealized within Christian life when the fathers of the church celebrated virginity in contrast to married life¹⁰. Contemporary to this period, literary authors used erotic language and connotations in their narratives in order to articulate the divine love as an ecstatic participation in God's very life¹¹. The strong tradition of Stoicism influenced very much the philosophical thinking of early Christians that become a commonplace in later centuries. The unfolding ideology of virginity however is highly complex, according to Castelli, "intertwining theological arguments, current philosophical ideas, and a collection of contemporary rhetorical themes produce a rightly woven image of virginity as the ideal of Christian life".¹²

Castelli, states that women that chose the ascetic life and remained virgins escaped the dangers and suffering of married life; Gregory of Nyssa however on his treatise *On Virginity*, he describes virginity as a spiritual state that can be enjoyed by both married and unmarried people rather than focusing on virginity's physical aspect.¹³ Simultaneously, the decision for women to remain virgins all their life presupposed a significant level of strength in order to oppose the physical dimensions of their bodies' demands; for this reason virgins were given manly qualifications by using adjectives as "bravely", "andreios" (ἀνδρείος) and "logismos" (λογισμός), qualities that only men had the right to appropriate¹⁴. Castelli stated that there was not any female voice in relation to her sexuality and the decision to remain a virgin. She affirms that:

[...] the inquiry produces a rather bleak picture of women's experience of both marriage and virginity in late antiquity, since both experiences were framed by a constraining ideology that constructed women's sexuality as an object of value to be traded-whether in the social marketplace or in the spiritual trading ground.¹⁵

On the other hand, Virginia Burrus (1994:30) also stated that not only was woman's sexuality institutionalized around fourth century AD, but it also became a tool that was used in order to reinforce social and ideological boundaries. It became evident that the institutionalization of virginity from the theocratic state gave unlimited control over the intellectual, social and sexual behavior of Christian women. Virgin women identified with the mother of Christ and as such they became the mothers of Christ on earth. This element placed them dynamically in the social order in which it was permitted to enjoy respect and universal acceptance. Virgins moreover freed themselves from imposed marriages, many of them enjoying independence and social status in order to pursue a path of erudition. As Burrus said:

[...] it is the problem of resistance to male control which most concerns ascetic women¹⁶. And once they have escaped the social and sexual domination of men and constructed an alternative ascetic culture, women are free to seek new expressions of their sexuality.¹⁷

Cassia, or Kassiani (Κασσιανή), apparently the only female famous within the Eastern Orthodox Church as a successful hymnographer, reflects some of these perceptions. In her literature of mostly poetical hymns, not only virginity but the whole of the human body is passionately glorified. The body, the senses and the feelings that constitute a vital aspect in her poetry, are considered as indispensable elements to exercise the ritual practises towards the veneration of the icons and the sensual performance of prayer. The direct or indirect references to the body, the senses and the feelings in Cassia's work could be considered as part of her wider Christian worldview that developed around Incarnation Theology.¹⁸ Cassia also makes reference to female gender that could be considered a very daring aspect to articulate in her immediate context. Tsironis (2003:151), states rhetorically: "Could we explain this reference on the grounds of the surviving testimony of the legends surrounding Cassia's person, according to which she was an exceptional woman for her age, direct and straightforward when she felt an answer was required"?¹⁹ The point of significance here, however, are the poems by a woman (Cassia) referring to other women in late antiquity, where, in her inventive techniques, she denotes freedom of spirit and an independent way of thinking. Yet she emphasises virginity, purity and chastity, referring to mother of God (as an exemplar?). Indirectly, she elevates the female body and mind, socially (in her time), spiritually and intellectually. By giving emphasis to a woman's body through her reference to the Theotokos, Cassia alludes to the significance of it as a vital element for the manifestation of human life. Here is an example of her poetry:

Θεοτόκιον
 Ρυσθείμεν των δεινών
 πταισμάτων ταις ικεσίαις σου,
 Θεογεννήτωρ αγνή,
 και τύχοιμεν, πάνταγνε,
 της θείας ελλάμψεως
 του εκ σου αφράστως
 σαρκωθέντος υιού του Θεού²⁰.

Cassia's hymns belong to this strong ecclesiastical written tradition that articulated the impact of virginity, purity, but also passion, repentance and love through

the centuries. Cassia's most popular hymn is the Troparion on the matins of Wednesday of Holy Week (otherwise known as the Τροπάριον της Κασσιανής): «Κύριε, η εν πολλαίς αμαρτίαις περιπεσούσα γυνή, την σην αισθομένη θεότητα, μυροφόρου αναλαβούσαν τάξιν, οδυρομένη, μύρα σοι, προ του ενταφιασμού κομίζει». This Troparion became known by women of all ages who eventually associate themselves with the symbolic imagery of this poetry, until the present day. The hymn also epitomises a long, both literary and oral, ecclesiastical tradition that has nurtured generations of women with ethics as well as the values of repentance and love, but most of all the significance of purity and virginity. The first generation Greek-Australian women denote the fundamental point of conveyance from the Greek remote village to Australia's multicultural society; it is these women that carried forward the living remnants of a long Christian tradition. With the engagement of oral history and the methodology of data recording their inner self and life experience, values and ethics became possible to be conceptualised. Thus, the concept of virginity in contemporary Australian society has created a living dialogue between past and present.

INTERGENERATIONAL VOICES FROM GREEK AUSTRALIAN WOMEN

«Ήσπιλε, Αμόλυντε, Άφθορε, Άχραντε, Αγνή Παρθένε, Θεόνυμφε Δέσποινα...»

“O Sovereign-Lady, Bride of God, spotless, undefiled,
incorrupt, most-pure, and chaste Virgin...”

Hymn in the Virgin, Mother of God, from the Greek Orthodox Church

Oral history: A brief discussion

An epigrammatic characterization that is given by Ronald J. Grele states that oral history is “the interviewing of eye-witness participants in the events of the past for the purposes of historical reconstruction”.²¹ Moreover, oral history is a method of research that can provide access to undocumented experiences of marginalized members of society, from both the past and the present. Oral narratives conceptualize and evidence subjective or personal meanings of events, exploring mainly the human consciousness, rather than the events as such. In a wider definition K. Anderson affirmed:

Oral history is a basic tool in our efforts to incorporate the previously overlooked lives, activities, and feelings of women into our understanding, of the past and of the present. When women speak for themselves, they reveal hidden realities: new experiences and new perspectives emerge that challenge the “truths” of official accounts and cast doubt upon established theories. Interviews with women can explore private realms such as reproduction, child rearing, and sexuality to tell us what women actually did instead of what experts thought they did or should have done. Interviews can also tell us how women felt about what they did and can interpret the personal meaning and value of particular activities.²²

Oral history is a complicated and highly sophisticated interdisciplinary mode of research and interpretation that has been practiced within academia for at least the past sixty years. Recent bibliography reveals a plethora of scholarship dedicated to this end, including methods and interpretive techniques employed in such disciplines as anthropology, sociology, history and feminism. Feminists especially embraced the unique opportunities they were given of uncovering silent or inaudible voices of other women with great success. They produced an immense amount of life stories, in which they transformed experiences, feelings and attitudes into meaningful literary data. As Minister asserts, “Women talking with women use a unique dialectical choice of words coordinated with a unique nonverbal system for the purpose of exploring and naming issues unique to women”.²³ In this paper will be examined oral narratives that were recorded by the author in the last two years, and encompass women’s voices from all over Australia. The significance of the research is that for the first time, Greek-Australian women of three generations were given the opportunity to speak about themselves, their values and their insights. These intergenerational oral narratives reflect, partially, the female Greek-Australian consciousness.

Thus, the research is about traditional Greek values in three generations of women in Australia. The “value” of virginity was not initially included in the plans of this research; it became however one of the most significant questions of the enquiry when one of the first participants claimed spontaneously that virginity is a notable “Greek” value. The concept of virginity however is not only a Greek value, but the interviewee proudly declared that her husband, the first man that she met

and got married with as a young girl “found her a virgin” (τίμια). Women of the first migrant generation that came to Australia as young people – irrespectively of whether or not they were married in Greece or later in Australia – brought with them living traditions and cultural values which they applied first to themselves, and then to their children and their grandchildren. Virginity was highly valued by the majority of these interviewees, although for most of them it was not an open subject; in their generation it was still an unwritten silent natural law with very deep roots in an extended patriarchal tradition, as previously mentioned. Not surprisingly for many of them then, virginity continues to be an unspoken, innate reality, both existent and non-existent; they insisted that its persistent value to women was the unquestionable moral reputation it gave them and the decisive role it played in a well-balanced married life. J.K. Campbell (1964) in his analysis of the moral values in a Greek mountain community stated the following:

Maidens must be virgins, and even married women must remain virginal in thought and expression. Her honor depends upon the reputation which the community is willing to concede, not upon the evidence of facts in any case difficult to determinate. Therefore she protects her honor most effectively by conforming in every outward aspect of her deportment to a code of sexual shame. A woman who succeeds in this is τίμια and τιμημένη, honourable and honoured; but, if she fails, she is αδιάντροπη, shameless, and σκύλλα, a bitch, a woman without restraint whose behaviour is compounded of the reflexes of her animal instincts. She becomes “used” (μεταχειρισμένη), if only on the lips of men, and therefore “lost” (χαμένη) (Campbell K. J., 1964:270).²⁴

Campbell based his scholarship on a particular geographical place in rural Greece, the community of Greek Sarakatsan shepherds. Apparently they do not represent the female population in the cities but certainly reflect the reality of the majority of the rural Greek population until recently. The reader is able to discern the similarity of the harsh criticism towards women who do not keep intact hymen and the narratives of the first generation Greek-Australian women.

INTERGENERATIONAL VOICES FROM GREEK AUSTRALIAN WOMEN

First migrant generation: Grandmothers

Virgin: "You are in control!"

The revealed narratives of this article documented the convictions of three generations of women in Australia. A cohesive structure, from the grandmother to granddaughter, in order to uphold an intergenerational approach from one generation to another is maintained. The method's intention is to examine a possible progress from one generation to another and to expose the *value's* (virginity) effectiveness, differentiation or rejection. It is evident though that in the first migrant generation (grandmothers), the remnants of one cultural and social framework that, probably, no longer has the same significance in the Greek social structure is sounded. Here is *Nikolitsa's* voice as she has been recorded:

I like a girl to be virgin when she is got married [...] if she is go around with one dozen men and then got married [...] this is not good [...] With my husband we were friends first and then he asked me for marriage from my Godfather [...] In my days if I was not virgin (*entaxi*) he (my husband) would slanged me that I was a slut [...] when you are a virgin no one is able to say anything and *you are in control* [...] (H1: Nikolitsa, Melbourne, 2009).

The language *Nikolitsa* uses means that she is a strong advocator of virginity and she "likes" other female members in her family to follow in this direction. Women like *Nikolitsa* grew up in an environment where the patriarchal, traditional values were strict for the entire female population. Loss of virginity meant not only a mutilated, incomplete anatomy (defloration), but also a mutilated self. A woman that is not a virgin would be subjected to continued abuse and disparaging remarks, *Nikolitsa* affirms. This state of affairs would create a distressing environment within the family and a discontented relationship between the couple. The testimony elicits the subordination of women in a place that could create a guilty conscience. By placing a woman in a lower status only because she was not a virgin could create extensive psychological predicaments and low self esteem with

unpredictable consequences. On the contrary, an unspoiled hymen works very powerfully in a personal and social manner: a virgin succeeds in her transformation from girl to womanhood, she achieves a self disciplined outcome and, justifiably, she would be entitled to claim *control* in order to create a harmonious environment for herself and her family. Nikolitsa however did not exist outside the social framework that was created for her and about her. She also reflects upon her opinion not on the basis of who she is or her predilections, but in terms of how her husband sees her and how her culture sees her. She saw herself as part of the social norm and regardless if she liked it or not, she admitted that her husband was “happy” that she was a τίμη. *Athena* reinforced this element by advancing the assumption that for a girl to remain a virgin denotes respect for her body. Indicatively, *Athena* claimed that,

[...] Virginité is very important for a woman because it denotes respect for her body [...] I always used to say to all my children, boys and girls, and now to my grandchildren that ethos and love is very important [...] to my granddaughters I say to love somebody is not bad thing but *do not give them meet to eat before marriage* (literally, do not satisfy his sexual appetite) (B1: *Athena*, Adelaide, 2009).

Most of the women of the first migrant generation (grandmothers), influenced by the dominant patriarchal values of their original country (Greece), supported the idea that a virgin bride could create a well-balanced outcome in the family. Most of these women were eager to speak but their words were limited, quick to report and completed their utterances fragmentarily. Rather than an unhesitant narration, there were a lot of silences in between the sentences, apprehensive body language, worried facial expressions and gesticulations. Anthippi epitomizes with her response, a negative epigrammatic sentence that expressed obvious disappointed that she did not have any influence on her grandchildren: *Anthippi* said, “Morals are very important for women [...] my husband and I were very strict with our daughter [...] I have not any influence in my grandchildren though” (B1: *Anthippi*-Sydney, 2010).

Not surprisingly, some women connected morality and virginity with religion. Religion for these women played a substantial role in their lives, since virginity

associated with the Virgin Mary denotes the prototype of the Christian ethos – as previously indicated. For them, virginity did not simply signify respect for the body – it is not just a social or cultural affair – but a sacred mystery that is associated with the Creator, God. Evangelia stated the connection between morality and virginity in the following manner:

Morality and virginity it has to do with religion. If you respect religion, if you believe in God you have to follow its canons [...] we do not have to do what ever we see in the streets [...] people who behave without respect [...] it is also a case of dignity [...] I taught my children to have respect, my boys to respect girls and do not *destroy* (their virginity) them, and my daughter do not to go around with boys [...] the same I teach to my granddaughter, as well (D1: Evangelia-Sydney, 2009).

Not all women however have the same opinion. *Athanasia*, a first generation migrant, believes that for a girl to maintain her virginity until marriage is an anachronistic. She even instructed her granddaughter to have some experiences before marriage. Athanasia married the first man she met and she and her husband forced their daughter to marry the first man that she met as well. She now understands that it would not be improper for women to look around for better prospects. She believes that virginity is not always a value to imitate, as virginity does not equate to goodness. In other words, she does not preclude the fact that non-virgins can be good women also. It is more significant, Athanasia maintains, for a woman to behave suitably as a married woman, to look after her household, her children and to have respect in society by demonstrating activities that will help the society to advance. Athanasia stated:

To maintain one woman her virginity is not very important for me [...] these are very old beliefs [...] a woman could be virgin and be very bed person and alternatively not to be a virgin but be an important person [...] I advice my granddaughter that it is not bad to have some experience in life before marriage [...] the important thing for me is to be a good wife and mother after marriage (E1: Athanasia, Sydney, 2009).

Second generation: Mothers

"It's a choice now. That's good [...] It's healthier [...]"

Second generation women are characterized by an interesting pattern: almost all rebelled at some stage during their formative years. The types, phases and lengths of these rebellious acts vary. Some admit that in order to fit in with their Australian peers they lied to their parents; they often rejected their Greek heritage, they denied their roots, and they tried to be something else. Now, as mature women, mothers and wives recollect their actions and with the secure distance of the time, they reevaluate themselves. Interestingly, in the case of the social or cultural value of virginity they maintain enough elements inherited from their mothers' beliefs, but they are more perceptive of their body, their decisions, and their responsibilities. Almost all of them have received secondary or higher education and have successfully interwoven the best of their heritage and the freedom they enjoy in Australian society. The following statement gives an unambiguous representation of the mother-daughter relationship and the difference in the two generations reflects two different worlds:

In contrast to my mother, I grew up in a generation that had not only the hope, but the expectation that they would explore their sexuality, perhaps find romantic love, and have a partnership of equals. In Greek, there are two names for love. The English language has only one word for the depth and complexity of this most beautiful and profound of human experiences. Greek has *agape*, the deep bond between soul mates, the unconditional love a parent feels for a child, or the love true friends might feel for one another; then there is *eros*, the fire of sexual love and passion, an experience I suspect my mother has never had (Simos Ch., 199: 2006).

Coming back to our interviewees, I will refer to second generation Greek-Australian women who enjoy the freedom of Australian society and make conscious decisions about their bodies and their sexuality. *Paraskevi*, although a second generation Greek, is already a grandmother. She is not austere like most of the first generation grandmothers but she is not relaxed either. She believes that young people nowadays are concerned about virginity, but in healthier ways than those in the past. The following is what she believes about virginity:

[...] probably, you like to do the right thing and get married as a virgin [...] and all those things [...] years back that's how it was [...] it was strict in my generation [...] but saying that [...] there were kids that had different freedom at my time and they were Greek too [...] my parents though were strict [...] now I think it will come back [...] that's how I can see it now [...] you talk to your grandkids and you say [...] you won't be doing that [...] and you won't be doing this [...] I think it will come back but not that strict [...] it is a choice now. That's good [...] it's healthier" (D1: Paraskevi, Brisbane, 2009).

It is not the same with *Anthoula* though. *Anthoula* is one of those second generation daughters that rebelled in their formative years. She lied to her parents in order to get her way. Now, as a mother, she does not believe that austerity is the best approach to educate children for the essentials of life. She prefers to speak openly with her daughter to help her possibly avoid undesirable mistakes. Not surprisingly, *Anthoula* did not express any opinion about virginity, and she was not persuaded to do so by the interviewer. It was obvious that she felt quite uncomfortable discussing moral issues. *Anthoula* appeared to be trying to withhold herself in order to forget traumatic experiences probably caused by the conflict between the strictness of her parents and the freedom that she wanted to enjoy as a young girl. *Anthoula* essentially admitted that she and her siblings *did a lot of things behind their (parents') backs*.

My mother was very religious [...] all moral derived from it [...] My parents were strict [...] growing up in Australia as second generation kids were called *wogs* [...] We lied [...] *so we lied and we did a lot of things behind their backs* [...] (B2: *Anthoula*, Sydney, 2009).

Maria however speaks very freely for herself, her mother and her daughter. It seems that the three have a special bond that is reflected in their interviews. *Maria's* mother, *Evangelia* (D1: see above), is a religious and very dynamic lady – she could be characterized as a matriarch in the old fashioned way. For her, virginity is connected with religion. *Maria*, a second generation Greek-Australian, did not apprehend her mother in her adolescence but she now appreciates the values of

morality as a mature age mother herself. Maria also admits that she obtained respect from her husband because she was a virgin. Maria (Adelaide) expressed dynamically the same opinion. Virginity for unmarried women is honored with such values as respect, pride and dignity. She states characteristically: "Virginity is very important for girls [...] moral values connected with religion [...] and the girl must be a virgin before marriage [...] virginity gives pride, respect and dignity [...]" (B2: Maria, Adelaide, 2009). And Maria (Sydney) expresses freely her opinion about virginity:

Both of my mother and I, told her (Maria's daughter and Evangelia's granddaughter) that she has to be a virgin when she gets married, we don't want her sleeping around... But I really appreciate it now (remain virgin until marriage) because listening to my friends with their partners, when they have fights, the first thing that they say is you were a tart. And even though my husband and I don't fight, he really values it (D2: Maria, Sydney, 2009).

Furthermore, there are elements that need additional clarification. Firstly, not all women share the same view regarding premarital relationships. Secondly, for many of them, the loss of virginity with the partner you love and will be marry is not a moral. They have however strong concerns relating to changing many partners before marriage, or having "given in", without a deeper appreciation and esteem. This element was expressed rather strongly by many women regarding, essentially, their daughters' present and future activities, (third generation Greek Australian women). *Eleni* is one of them. She indicated:

I would like to think [...] I was not a virgin when I was married. I had sex with my husband before we got married [...] we had a long term relationship [...] I would be very disappointed if my daughter had sex with some guy that they didn't know very well or that they didn't know very long [...] but if they were in a very long term relationship [...] I am talking about something like, a year [...] I would be surprised [...] (H2: Eleni, Melbourne, 2009).

Penny is another interviewee who shares similar fears. Penny is one of those rebellious young women who spent considerable time regretting many things from her premarital years. She does not regret the loss of her virginity, but rather the way things turned out for her; an early pregnancy and consequent marriage. She is rather anxious now in regard to her daughters and their future relationships. The reputation of unmarried girls still matters within the Greek community and Penny is strongly perceptive to this end. The interviewee is a highly educated, progressive, and bright woman; she enjoys a respectful position in society and she is very active member within cultural organizations. However, when it comes to her daughters, she becomes rather conservative and overprotective. She does not want them to be hurt, to be exposed within the Greek community, where there is still space for social-cultural and ethical criticism. Penny expresses her concerns in the following way:

[...] in our community, there were expectations that I would behave properly but I did rebel a little bit. I was actually pregnant when I was married [...] it was very stressful for me. I wanted to have my child and maybe get married after [...] I wouldn't want that to happen to my daughter [...] (E2: Penny, Sydney, 2009).

Virginity, as such, does not matter significantly for second generation women. Nevertheless, the loss of virginity connected with statuses and behaviors that still carry weight to some people, and the reputation of an unmarried woman – even married – has deep roots in traditional Greek culture. It is rather easy to be progressive and liberated, but when it comes to the safety of daughters, conservatism is likely to emerge – even without realizing it.

Third generation: Granddaughters

"It is personal!"

Third generation interviewees were not married at the time the research was undertaken. The majority of this sample's participants are students over 18 years old or graduates, and many confessed that they already had a relationship, but were not necessarily sexually active. They were rather defensive and they expressed

the opinion that virginity “is a personal” issue. It seems however, that the younger generation – the third Greek-Australian generation being researched – redefines the loss of virginity rather than choosing to abandon the concept entirely. Abstinence until marriage, or loss of virginity before it, is something that occupies considerable space in their minds. Most of the interviewees were concerned with doing the right thing, at the right time with the right person. Some of them have the support and encouragement of their mother or/and grandmother, for others, abstinence or loss of virginity is purely a choice – a decision made by an individual weighing up the pros and cons. For others still, virginity is a defense mechanism against the strong forces of sexual temptation. The rest are very much influenced by mothers and/or grandmothers and virginity continues to demonstrate purity and control over one’s carnal nature, as well as the ability to control their life and their body. Indicatively, this is what Jacqueline had to say regarding virginity:

[...] I think you should wait (until marriage). I think it’s a personal thing. I want to wait, I promised myself to wait, and not necessarily because it is a religious thing but at the same time there are a lot of people that argue, how would you know if it is the right person if you don’t do [...] (B3: Jacqueline, Sydney, 2009).

Jacqueline’s mother was rebellious and she avoided speaking about virginity (see above, B2: Anthoula. Her grandmother (B1: Anthippi) was so strict towards her mother, Anthoula, and her siblings, that they “did a lot behind their parents backs”. Jacqueline however lives in a different environment and epoch; her parents are educated and she is studying Law at university. She is in control of her life, her body and her decisions. Abstinence is a personal decision and the loss of virginity is entirely her choice.

For *Athena* things seem easier and straightforward. Athena was 22 years old when interviewed and was concentrating on her wedding preparations. She claimed that she was very delighted that she had kept her virginity intact for the right person at the right time. She knew that her husband to be would be very appreciative and this element gave her pride and confidence to be in control of the situation. This feeling had nothing to do with religious, cultural or social conventions. It resulted from personal decisions, discipline and moral values. Athena

continues the traditional views of both her grandmother and mother (see above, B1: Athena and B2: Maria, Adelaide, 2009), which influenced her a lot. Athena said to the interviewer:

My mother and I had numerous conversations [...] virginity has to do with morals and self respect [...] it is not religious, cultural or social [...] it is a choice and it is about yourself [...] My husband to be (she would be married in the next two weeks) [...] was very surprised when I told him that I didn't go with anyone before him [...] Hope to pass this to my children... (B3: Athena, Adelaide, 2009).

Although *Anastasia's* grandmother is strict with virginity and other moral values, Anastasia did not comply with her grandmothers' convictions. *Nikolitsa* (see above, H1: Nikolitsa) is convinced that virginity gives strength to women, allowing them to be in control. However, both her daughter, and more so her granddaughter, rejected this view. Anastasia clearly proclaimed that she will not be like her grandmother. Her grandmother is an example she wants to avoid as she is ready to follow her own decisions. A pre-marital relationship is a must for Anastasia. She stated characteristically:

[...] it won't be like grandmother [...] it will continue a little bit (Greek traditional values) [...] you don't know who you will marry [...] it's hard [...] virginity is not so important [...] you have to have that (pre-marital relationships) before you get married [...] (H2: Anastasia, Melbourne, 2009).

Efrosini has also the freedom to choose for her life, her body, and her relationships. She was even encouraged by her mother and grandmother to have some relationships before marrying the "right one". She claims that virginity is a choice, and for her to remain a virgin until marriage does not hold any significance:

[...] I think that virginity is a choice [...] I do not think that for me being virgin holds much of importance [...] I do not think my mother and grandmother have told me go out and sleep with anyone [...] but they said

that it is ok if you have a meaningful relationship as well [...] with someone, I think they realized that in the ideal love you have to be practical (E3: Efrosini, Sydney, 2009).

The general characteristic of third generation Greek-Australian women is that they share values that interconnect with Australian values. They enjoy the advantage of freedom and the ability to make decisions about themselves. They are all given choices, they are open to immense information and most of them acquired an excellent education; various paths in life are open. It is their decision as to how to deal with their body, their relationships, and their values. But are their options so simple?

The study of the enquiry shows that virginity is still a huge chapter in women's life. Since antiquity virginity was closely connected with the ideological and socio-economic status of states, irrespective of whether this state was non-Christian or Christian. The feminist approach today supports the idea that virginity was a way of male domination. Researching closely to the written sources however (written down to us, however, by males), reveal that asceticism and maintenance of virginity was a woman's decision. The Fathers of the Church celebrated both maintenance of virginity and married life, as virginity was also perceived in its spiritual dimension. A woman could be married and have children but still remain a virgin in the spirit and soul so that to allow her dedication to Jesus Christ. The impact of virginity however was huge in women's lives for many centuries and religion was a very significant part of life across this time. Thus religion was inseparable from the ethics and values of the community and the female population was expected to follow these ethics, never wandering against a powerful status that kept religiously the written or unwritten rules of this sacred tradition. This tradition has been recorded verbatim and is reflected in the first generation of Greek-Australian women. Second generation women were still confused, demonstrating a noticeable uneasy attitude towards virginity which reveals the traumatic, divergent experience by living between two worlds of values, that of the Greek traditional family system and that of the liberalism of Australian society. Their ethics regarding virginity are divided and affected by both worlds, but their daughters reveal more confidence in their decision to make choices for themselves and their bodies. Nevertheless, a strong figure of a matriarch is observable, a traditional

grandmother that functions as a haunted image that reflects an alternative world. This world has been both transformed and rooted within local communities by making a sound contribution to Australian society.

Finally, when trying to globalize the concept of virginity in today's social environment, scholars realized that the aspect of virginity is a complicated one. Although societies experienced many changes and accelerated developments in every aspect of life, the aspect of virginity continues to mark an important element in social and personal identity throughout the last decades of the twentieth century in both the western and eastern world. According to Bernau (2004:58), "in recent years, George W. Bush's government – following what some have seen as Clinton's initial support for abstinence education in the mid-1990s – has put virginity back on the agenda, claiming that doing so is part of its response to a widespread yearning for a return to 'traditional values'".²⁵

Bernau also argues the ever-increasing number of clinics together with the hidden but big industry that offers, 'hymen restoration' attests to the persistence of a virginal ideal in western culture".²⁶ Here virginity is advertised as a commodity and an object of art by employing a variety of inclusive names like, "Hymenoplasty", "Hymenorraphy" or, "hymen repair surgery"; all these at a time at a time when scholars are questioning that the anatomical nature of the hymen ever existed in the way that the collective popular opinion maintains. According to Bernau (2004:6), "the question of the hymen or other unquestionable physical proofs of virginity has remained contested until the present day". Virginity could mean a variety of things and could encompass a plethora of connotations, as I mentioned in the introduction of this article, but these meanings and connotations never would be either innocent or unimportant.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Bernau, A., *Virgins: A Cultural History*. (Granta Books, 2007) London, 24.
- 2 Freud, S., "The Taboo of Virginité", in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, in collaboration with Anna Freud and assistance of Alix Stracey and Alan Tyson, XI (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), p.p. 192-208.
- 3 Freud, S., *Ibid*, p. 206.
- 4 Bernau, A., *Op cit* p.24.

- 5 <http://greeksocialists.eurodiscussion.net/t34-topic>
- 6 Homer describes in many details Achilles' shield where in one side depicted the bridal ceremony, with feasting, youth, and bridal songs. He even referred to the God of marriage, Υμέναιος, where the textualisation of hymen (παρθενικός υμένας) comes from: "In the one were wedding-feasts and they were going about the city with brides they were escorting by torching from their chambers. Loud rose, the rose of Hymen and the your danced to the music of flute and lyre, which the women stood each at her house door to see them". Homer, *Iliad*, Books 13-24. trans. by Murray, A. T., *The Loeb Classical Library* (1999, London), Book 18, p. 323.
- 7 Davenport G., (1965), *Sappho: Poems and Fragments*. The University of Michigan Press.
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- 10 Jean Chrysostome, *La Virginite*, Sources Chretiennes, Paris, 1966.
- 11 Louth, A., *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, p. 170, and 65-66.
- 12 Castelli, E. *Ibid.* p. 68.
- 13 Greogoire De Nysse, *Traite de la virginite* (Greek and French), Sources Chretiennes, Paris, 1966.
- 14 This probably because of women's participation in Christ's life, within whom the genders are transfigured. "οὐκ ἐνὶ Ἰουδαίῳ, οὐκ ἐνὶ δούλῳ οὐδὲ ἐλεύθερῳ, οὐκ ἐνὶ ἄρσεν καὶ θήλῃ, πάντες γὰρ ὑμεῖς εἰς ἓστε ἐν Χριστῷ". Galatians 3:28.
- 15 Castelli, E. *Ibid.* p. 88.
- 16 However the written tradition contradicts Burrus' feminist approach; because in almost all the biographies of female saints, including the hymns dedicated to them by the Church, exhibit the ultimate purpose; to unite them spiritually with Christ. So we have several positions; either women wanted to actively participate in the life of God-man or they wanted to escape the dominion of men in general, or both. In this article however we discuss virginity in relation to both written and oral sources and associated with the ecclesiastical written tradition as well.
- 17 Burrus V., "Word and Flesh: The Bodies and Sexuality of Ascetic Women in Christian Antiquity". *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*. Vol. 10, No 1 (spring 1994) P. 32.
- 18 Tsironis, N., "The Body and the Senses in the works of Cassia the Hymnographer: Literary trends in the Iconoclastic period". *Byzantina Symmeikta*, 16, 2003, Institute of Byzantine Research, Athens. 151.
- 19 Tsironis, N., *Ibid.* p. 151.
- 20 Translation: Theotokion / Undeified mother of God, / may we be delivered from our / grievous transgressions by your prayers, / and may we dwell, all pure one, / in the divine glory/of the Son of God / who ineffably took flesh from you. Translated by

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- 25 Bernau, A., *Op cit*, p. 58
- 26 Bernau, A. *Ibid*, p.26.